Director’s Book based on the production of

THE LAST DAYS OF JUDAS ISCARIOT

by Stephen Adly Guirgis

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"A theatrical production needs the director’s talent, his personality, [her] imagination, his power of attraction, [her] authority over the actors... [they] stand for unity, [they] are the guarantee of intelligence, of efficiency, of quality. I am a director myself!"

- MICHEL SAINT-DENIS, 1960

INTRODUCTION

When tasked with the job of finding a thesis play to direct I was blissfully ignorant of how challenging the selection process would be. I had to find a play that I felt passionate about, that was tailored to our student body of actors, that would appeal to the Brooklyn College audience, and would pass the meticulous vetting process of Graduate Directing Head, Thomas Bullard. This was an undertaking akin to shish-kebabbing four apples in a row with an arrow and nailing a bullseye behind them in a single shot. I think that in the end, I was able to squarely hit my target. This thesis paper will attempt to explain how I selected, directed, and presented Pulitzer-prize winning playwright, Stephen Adly Guirgis', *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* at Brooklyn College.

My personal criteria for selecting a thesis play had several facets. My utmost priority was to find an intelligently written play that contained both pathos and humor and that did not feel, for lack of a better term, dated. Up until this point in my graduate journey, I had worked on material by authors such as John Steinbeck, Edward Albee and Lynn Nottage so the writing-bar was set high. I was not interested in working with the material of a playwright whose writing was in any way inferior to these great authors. I wanted a play written with intelligent dialogue that was held together by solid scene structure. It had to have a "spine" that I was eager to deconstruct, analyze and rebuild. In her book, *Directing Plays, Directing People*, Mary B. Robinson states that she cannot inspire her collaborators, actors, designers, and eventually the
audience, if she is not continually inspired by the play (12). Similarly, I had to locate a play that I found compelling and a compelling play to me is one that deals with the extreme conditions of humanity that is set in an atmosphere that is both recognizable and fantastical. I wanted a play with a strong heart and a questioning soul. For weeks I combed through the third-floor stacks at Brooklyn College, the reference play section at the New York Public Library, and through every free PDF of a proven play that I found online. Once I combined my personal list of requirements with the departmental needs, I discovered how elusive the right choice was going to be. By the end of the third week of searching, the right play had not presented itself to me. I perused, read, and flipped through what seemed like 1001 plays. You name it, I scanned, skimmed or read it - Pirandello, Simon, Euripides, Steinbeck, Guare, Linney, Rabe, both Wilsons, Williams, O'Neill, Lori Parks, Churchill, Paula Vogel, Treadwell, Wasserstein, Kushner, Kramer, Letts, Frayn, Mamet, Brecht, Stoppard, Moliere, Beckett, Shepard, Shaw and Lorca. I searched and I searched, but nothing lined up well enough for me to seriously consider. I was faced with a myriad of objections: too many characters, wrong-aged characters, too dated, too absurd, too confusing, too poetic, not poetic, too racist, too sexist, too experimental, too expensive, too British, too Irish, too Russian, too short, too long, too formal, to loose, and on and on. It seemed the perfectly-tailored play for me and the Brooklyn College Theater Department might not exist. Then, one sunny Tuesday afternoon at the Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center, I plucked Stephen Adly Guirgis’, *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* off the shelf,

(Above, the plays stack up)
I. THE PLAY

The Last Days of Judas Iscariot ("Judas") is Guirgis' seventh play and had everything I wanted (and some of what I needed) in a play. It was the compelling piece of theater that I had been searching for. It was a play with phenomenal dialogue, fascinating characters, a whimsical setting and an emotional core that held great meaning. The biblical subject of Judas has been a curiosity of mine for a long time and this play contained the elusiveness of a Christian-themed theater piece that honors the faith but does not over-evangelize. Most plays or musicals with any mention of Jesus in them typically presents the Gospel in an urbane and uninteresting way. Judas however, is a piece that balances itself perfectly between the zealot and the Zen and asks questions instead of making accusations. It is a provocative examination of Christian salvation through the lens of its most nefarious player, Judas Iscariot. The play was a perfect fit for me, and my graduate thesis selection committee thought so too. And thus, my thesis production was launched.

Judas is a courtroom drama telling the story of an attempt to lift the verdict of eternal damnation from Judas Iscariot. Set in a purgatorial court, Judas' fate is argued between a defense attorney hell-bent on unveiling the probity of Judas' "betrayal" of Jesus Christ and a
prosecutor aimed at keeping Judas safely secured in Hell. The ultimate argument is not whether Judas willfully betrayed Jesus or not but whether his ensuing despair, which prevents him from accepting forgiveness and grace from God, is a prideful choice or a condition completely out of his ability to control. The "spine" or central story of the play can be described as 'pride-driven despair obstructing one's ability to acquiesce to mercy.' A worthy thesis statement occurs in the play itself in the form of a Thomas Merton quote from his book, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (180). The line is repeated twice by Sister Glenna and prompted by Mother Teresa in the first act:

SISTER GLENNA. "Despair... is the ultimate development of a pride so great and so stiff-necked that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God and thereby acknowledge that he is above us and that we are not capable of fulfilling our destiny by ourselves" (Guirgis 38).

### III. PRODUCTION HISTORY

*Judas* premiered Off-Broadway in 2005 as a LAByrinth Theatre Company production at the Public Theater. The sold out and extended run was directed by the late Phillip Seymour Hoffman and starred Eric Bogosian as Satan and Sam Rockwell as Judas Iscariot. The production opened to mostly positive, but sometimes mixed reviews. Ben Brantley of the *The New York Times* described Mr. Guirgis as having "a fierce and questing mind that refuses to settle for glib answers, a gift for identifying with life’s losers and an unforced eloquence that finds the poetry in lowdown street talk." Brantley also stated that "Mr. Guirgis,
however, has overfilled his slate with historical references and characters, all ultimately making the same point." Marilyn Stasio of Variety wrote that the play was a "...Calvinist view, hard and uncompromising, but honestly arrived at and eloquently stated by Guirgis, who has used his time in Purgatory well." At the time of the opening Mr. Guirgis felt that the play was a failure. Up until the opening of Judas, his earlier plays were typically met with unanimous praise. For the first two weeks of performances Guirgis recalled hiding from the public in his apartment. He finally acceded to the success of the play when at 11pm one evening he got a call from renowned playwright John Guare telling Guirgis how much he enjoyed the play (Guirgis). In 2008, three years after the New York premier, Judas had a unanimously-praised run on London's West End at the Almeida Theater in a production directed by Artistic Director, Rupert Goold. Michael Billington of The Guardian wrote that Goold's production was "...a gloriously intoxicating brew that, in its fantasy and daring, reminds me of Tony Kushner's equally high-flying Angels in America." For the past fifteen years, the play has become a staple among college and community theater groups.

IV. CONTEXT

PERSONAL CONTEXT

In 2005, Guirgis claimed that "I don't want to know too much about why I write plays or why I wrote this play in particular... I grew up Catholic, so the story of the play is told within those parameters... Perhaps it's true that the best way to move forward is to go back, and so, in writing this play I went back" (Program). In a 2020 interview, Guirgis stated that he wrote the play as an opportunity to ask questions of the faith. He saw Judas as someone whom he personally felt deserved a second chance and was presenting that appeal to the audience and maybe even to God. Despite the initial mixed reception of the play, Guirgis commented that he has received more personal mail about Judas than about any other play he had written,
including his Pulitzer-winning play, *Between Riverside and Crazy*.

During the conception of *Judas*, Guirgis employed the aid of a Jesuit priest named James Martin ("Father Jim") as a biblical consultant. Father Jim, who is a best-selling author and culture editor of America Magazine, turned his experiences with *Judas* into a book. Titled *A Jesuit Off-Broadway*, this book was an insightful resource for us in mounting the Brooklyn College production. In the foreword to Father Jim's book, Guirgis wrote that "This play was especially hard to write, direct, act, and produce. There were problems all the time. All kinds of problems. In fact, there were so many problems to tackle that having a priest around was the least of our worries" (Martin). Having studied Guirgis' motivations during the writing of *Judas* and then speaking with him 15 years later, I've concluded that he is a person who believes that humans are a flawed species but who also deserve justice when justice is due. I believe Guirgis stands for justice and in writing *Judas*, he was perhaps attempting to reveal an unexplored truth of what Judas Iscariot experienced as the apostle who was blamed for the death of Jesus Christ.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

*Judas* is a play that was created from both a secular and religious context. At its core, the play tracks the chronicled first century journey of Judas Iscariot and the events that led to his betrayal of Jesus of Nazareth to the Roman and Jewish authorities. While the source material
hangs solidly on biblical New Testament accounts, the play's events occur in a New York City-esque courtroom. The setting is essentially a whimsical hybridization of an afterlife atmosphere and a 21st century urban environment. Near the start of the play, the character Gloria gives the following description of the setting: "Between Heaven and Hell-- there is another place. This place: Hope. Hope-- is located right over here in downtown Purgatory" (Judas 1.1.10). The purgatorial backdrop is rooted in the Catholic belief of a middle ground between heaven and earth, where sinners must spend a period of purging before ascending to Heaven. And, while Purgatory may seem like a place of pain and torment, it is important to point out that it is seen by Catholics as a place of expectant joy. (Trigilio 33). While the time period is never specified, the play is bound to the year 2004 with specific references to "recent events" alluding to the terrorist attacks of 2001 as well as a comment in the first act by defense attorney Cunningham about the passing of 140 years from a starting point of 1864.

V. CASTING

William Ball said that "casting is the major decision that a director makes. If you cast correctly, you have done about eighty percent of your work" (37). When a director fails to populate a play with people who embody some key element of the characters for which they are cast, the play loses credibility. I selected Judas because I knew the actors it required could be found amidst the Brooklyn College student actors. This play felt tailor-made for our students. Knowing that the ability to accurately cast this play was one of my main criteria in selecting it, I started the match-making work of casting when I first read the play and long before faculty approval as a thesis. Casting is an integral part of the directorial process so it made sense to begin the process well in advance of the general live auditions. It was imperative that I had a clear understanding of the characters and a strong familiarity of my casting pool of actors. I made it a habit to always stop and talk to actors whom I encountered around the campus or in class. Watching them in previous productions was also key to understanding what they could
bring to my production. By the time the general audition day arrived, I had developed a strong sense of who I wanted and for which roles they would be well suited. My preliminary "wish list" cast inevitably would change due to several factors. For one, I had to share the talent with three other fall productions; Sweat, Passover, and Gloria. I was fortunate in my pre-casting process to have the good counsel of all three acting department heads. Michael Colby Jones (BFA Head), JulyLee Vivier (MFA Head), and Laura Tessman (BA) were enthusiastic about my play and all believed that Judas offered valuable opportunities for their actors. They supplied me with detailed information on the abilities, habits and general potential of each auditioning actor. Would that I could always have the counsel of three acting professors when casting a play!

On the day of the general audition, I sat behind a table with my casting wish list in hand and took extensive notes on each potential actor. After five hours of highly concentrated listening and note taking, the session was done, and it came time to communicate my actor preferences to the other fall-semester directors and to the faculty. Fortunately, there had been a fair amount of preemptive discussion about who would be right for what shows/roles in the season. I had been informally briefed by the faculty on which MFA and BFA actors I was likely
not going to get due to necessary role assignments in the other two plays. Michael Page, the
director of *Gloria*, was also very gracious in agreeing to work with actors in whom I was not
particularly interested. As a result, I was able to put together a highly feasible first-choice-list
heading into callback auditions scheduled for the following weekend. I was not prepared for how
intense that callback day was going to be. I had 17 actors playing 27 different roles to cast
which was considerably more complicated than casting a two or three-character play. Our
callback "day" was only four hours in total. My industrious assistant-director Elissa Goetschius
and I had to be extremely well-prepared. Armed with multiple copies of 27 different sides for the
actors to read from, we began the day. After reading just a handful of actors, it became apparent
that if we didn't speed up our process, we'd run out of time. Inevitably however, I had to slow
down periodically to work with certain actors to determine whether they could effectively play the
roles. Five hours and several coffees later, we reached the end of our callback list. By the skin
of our teeth, we had a first, second and third choice cast selected. Our first choice list was still in
the unconfirmed zone as the faculty had yet to give final approval. Given all of my preliminary
discussions with the acting faculty however, I was confident we could cast the show to my
satisfaction. In the end, I was handed a first rate cast and, given the circumstances surrounding
the demand for actors in this particular season, I felt that a minor miracle had occurred getting it
done. The cast was secured, and with it 80% of something vital was put into play.

VI. PLAY ANALYSIS

THEME

There is an abundance of themes that course through this satirical-tragicomedic-
existentialist-history play. Among them are religious faith, existentialism, perdition, absolution,
betrayal, surrender and repentance. Floating to the top of this torrent, however, is perhaps the
most predominant theme of pride. Of the seven deadly sins, it is pride that seems to beget the
other six. Both Judge Littlefield and Sister Glenna mention pride as the root of Judas' inability to overcome despair. As the character of Mother Teresa puts it, it is his pride that prevents him from hearing "the music of God's love" and that he "...made himself hard of hearing" such that he could not receive God's blessing (Judas 1.5.39). Mother Teresa is suggesting that Judas made a choice not to surrender to God and that, by doing so, placed the liability of his fate upon himself. In The Seven Storey Mountain, Thomas Merton claims: "There is a paradox that lies in the very heart of human existence. It must be apprehended before any lasting happiness is possible in the soul of man. The paradox is this: man's nature, by itself, can do little or nothing to settle his most important problems. If we follow nothing but our natures, our own philosophies, our own level of ethics, we will end up in hell..." Merton offers a solution out of this abstract tunnel of despair; "Our nature, which is a free gift of God, was given to us to be perfected and enhanced by another free gift that is not due it. This free gift is 'sanctifying grace' (185). Merton argues that we are not capable of saving ourselves and that Judas had built himself a paradoxical trap by demanding that Jesus (God) admit fault for allowing him his free-will and as a result causing him to commit betrayal. Jesus offers to save him if he (Judas) would only admit that he lacks the power to save himself. "Don't you know," Jesus says "...what would happen the very instant you got down on your knees?" Judas, does not relent and puts the responsibility back on Jesus, saying "You left me." It seems that pride is what prevents Judas from both
forgiving himself and allowing others to forgive him (Judas 2.6.105).

**STRUCTURE**

In his book, *The Art & Craft of Playwriting*, Jeffrey Hatcher states that "a playwright is a poet disguised as an architect" (79). Guirgis is a competent architect and a compelling poet. However, many people argue that *Judas* is a house built with too many rooms and populated with an over-abundance of characters who sometimes serve redundant dramatic purposes. Because *Judas* has a cast of seventeen actors playing 27 different roles, 103 densely-written pages and a nearly 3-hour running time, one might accurately feel the play is overwritten. Guirgis has said that the play is not perfect, and, if he were ever to revisit the piece, he would consider doing some rewrites. While he did not specify what those adjustments would be, one can only assume several text cuts would be on his agenda (Guirgis).

*Judas* is a two act play with no subdivision of scenes. The action, however is written with natural breaking points that lend well to a "French Scene" treatment. There are two categories of action in the play, with the courtroom proceedings being the first and the frequent confessions of Saints appearing on Judas' behalf, the second. By following the natural dividing lines of the courtroom witness and Saint entrances, the play was easily cut into several smaller scenes. The first act was divided into a prologue with seven scenes and the second act was segmented

(Below, St. Thomas testifying for Judas)
into an entr'acte and six scenes. As far as traditional forms go, *Judas* could be described as a courtroom drama infused with comedy, pathos, and dueling propaganda.

Jeffery Hatcher cites the Aristotelian description of dramatic structure of a "whole action" broken down into a beginning, middle, and end. Hatcher then sub-divides these parts into three movements containing several smaller categories (87). By yoking Hatcher's Three Movements below to the framework of *Judas*, a blueprint for Guirgis' play structure can be clearly articulated:

Movement One (15-30 percent of the play)

1) *The start of the play*: The action of *Judas* is initiated by a prologue in which Henrietta Iscariot, the mother of Judas, submits an opening plea to the courtroom attendees (the audience).

2) *Introduction of characters, time, place and setting*: Within the first, second and third scene, the courtroom personnel, introduced by the Angel Gloria, have communicated the time and place and within Gloria's introduction monologue she has disclosed the rules of the world of the play. All of this occurs within the first 15 pages of the play.

3) *Introduction of a primary inciting event*: The moment the Bailiff announces the docket schedule of "God and the Kingdom of Heaven and Earth verses Judas Iscariot" on the third page, the action of the play is set into motion.

4) *Initial point of attack or primary conflict*: Hatcher describes this point as "the launching pad for the play". This moment occurs in Scene 3, page 15, when the Judge finally allows Judas' case to be written on the docket after a dose of emotional blackmail from Cunningham, the defense attorney.

5) *Introduction of the central dramatic question*: Judge Littlefield explicitly announces this question with an answer on page 14 when asked by Cunningham,
"Who wouldn't want to appeal eternal damnation?" Littlefield retorts: "Someone who was aware of his own self-inflicted erosion of the capacity to be filled by Grace... Someone too prideful to ask for forgiveness even in the face of the fiery furnace." (Judas 1.3.23) There is an array of terms to describe the central dramatic question of a play. Director and author Michael Bloom coined his version as the 'event' of the play as does Professor Tom Bullard, co-founder of Manhattan Theater Club. Bloom derives his "event" by way of determining what he calls the "central conflict of the play or "x's objective versus y's - forming a bridge between the internal and external, between actions and structure" (47). Staslavski used the term "spine". The spine, central event, or essential story of Judas can be identified in the question which asks the following: Is Hell a self-inflicted condition formed by one's refusal to accept grace and be forgiven?

Movement Two (50-75 percent of the play)

1) "Character(s) embark on journey/struggle/search for answers/goals": Like structural clockwork, this battle begins at the top of Scene Four, page 18, when the prosecuting attorney, El-Fayoume, and Cunningham square off against each other as the trail begins.

2) "Conflicts with other characters, events, circumstances": Throughout the fourth, fifth and sixth scenes of Act One (pages 18-38), a variety of witnesses are called to the stand giving conflicting testimonies about Judas Iscariot. Two saints also appear with dubiously aimed confessions, adding to the complication of circumstances.

3) "Character(s) reassess situations, respond to obstacles and challenges, plan new tactics, succeed, fail, attack, retreat, surprise and are surprised, encounter major reversals (rising action)": At the top of scene seven one of the biggest obstacles to not only the defense and prosecution but also to all courtroom occupants
materializes. Satan takes the stand on page 40. All characters must reassess their
actions, especially the council for the defense, as the prosecutor submits a
condemning statement from Judas. El-Fayoume recalls a conversation between

(Above, Satan manipulates Judas)

Satan and Jesus, quoting Judas as stating, "Fuck that guy, he's a bitch!", bringing
the curtain down on the first act. The second act opens with Mary Magdalene
volleying back with a confession in favor of Judas. Contained in scenes
two, three and four are a series of key testimonies including Caiaphas the Elder,
Saint Thomas and Pontius Pilat whose remonstrations increase in intensity with
every line. The defense re-conjures Satan for a second appearance in scene five
to successfully unravel the arguments on both sides of the case and

disrupt the belief system of the entire courtroom. This reversal of action represents

the crisis point which takes place in Act II, scene 5 on page 92 of the play.

Movement Three (5-25 percent of the play)

1) "The major characters or combatants engage in a final conflict (climax)"

The climax of Judas begins on page 93 during Act II, Scene 6 when Jesus confronts

Judas in a plea to love and accept him and by doing so, receive eternal life with him

in heaven (Judas). Judas, as characterized through a Catholic lens, lives by the rule

that in order to have salvation one must accept that Jesus is the son of God.

However, in order to receive the love of Jesus, Judas must first allow himself to do

so. The argument again is whether Judas' state of despair is a choice or something

that he has no control over. Guirgis at one point asked Father Jim, "Why couldn't

God just break through [Judas'] despair?" Martin emphatically replied, "No! That's

not the way it works! You have to participate in your own salvation!" (Martin 45)

2) "The character's goal is achieved or lost"

Ultimately, within the time frame of this

play, Judas fails to trade in his tight grip on despair for the soul-saving touch of

Jesus. He drops back into his original stasis, that of sitting alone in hell. Incidentally,

the presumed notion of hell as a vast underground lake of fire is upended by Jesus

himself. He suggests that "Hell" is the mere separation from God. Jesus poses this

question to Judas on page 96, "What if I were to tell you...that you are with me in my

Kingdom even now, and that you have been there since the morning of my

Ascension and that you have never left?" This kind of provocative examination of the

Christian faith might be another reason why Judas has such broad appeal (Judas).

3) "The central Dramatic Question is answered"

Indeed, during the very last scene

on page 99 the jury foreman, Butch Honeywell, enters and informs Judas that he
has been found guilty. (Judas)

4) "Following the climax is the resolution, in which a new order is established": The very last image of the play is Jesus washing Judas’ feet. While the text indicates that Jesus has always been pursuing Judas, a new order is established with the possible suggestion that this is the first time Judas has responded to Jesus and thereby gives new hope to Jesus’ pursuit. Guirgis’ hallmark technique of asking questions that beget more questions continues to resonate in this ending. The tension continues as the lights fade leaving the audience to wonder if there may still be hope for Judas. It's like Cunningham states to Caiaphas in Act II; "This is purgatory, Caiaphas. I've got all day" (Judas 2.2.76)

(Below, Jesus reaches out to Judas)
LANGUAGE

The prose of Judas is written in what Laura Collins-Hughes of Variety magazine describes as, "perfectly pitched contemporary urban vernacular that is a hallmark of Mr. Guirgis" (Collins-Hughes). The dialogue of Judas is in fact a symphony of idioms that seamlessly dance between poetry, street lingo, judicial parlance, philosophical debate and O'Neillian realism. William Ball claims that every play has a set of "predominant elements" which the director must identify (27). The language of Judas could easily be the dominant force of the play with the elements of theme and character trailing close behind. Guirgis is able to communicate complex ideas of faith and existentialist theories through language that is both relatable and highly comical. Father Jim identifies Guirgis' text as "that kind of in-your-face language [that] not only reflected the milieu of the characters but also prevented the presentation of religious themes from becoming either cozily conventional or piously sentimental, and probably helped open a window into theological questions for those normally put off by such topics" (17). In the first act on page 17, Saint Monica typifies this kind of dialogue when she introduces herself to the audience:

SAINT MONICA. My name is MONICA-- better known to you mere mortals as SAINT Monica. Yeah, dass right, SAINT-- as in 'better not don't get up in my grill 'cus I'll mess your shit up, 'cuz I'm a Saint and I got mad saintly connects,' okay! (Judas)

Saint Thomas gives another prime spoken example when he testifies in defense of Judas in the second act on page 79:

SAINT THOMAS. Some people say Judas did what he did 'cuz he was greedy. Personally, I think that's bullshit. The guy wasn't wandering around the desert for three years with Jesus and a bunch of ragamuffins like us 'cuz he was looking to get rich (Judas).

Throughout the play, Guirgis continually transforms the parlance of historically distant characters into relatable, plain-speaking 21st century city-dwellers. The text of Judas frequently
shifts into a poetic style as well. Characters such as Mary Magdalene, Jesus and Butch Honeywell speak plainly and directly one moment and then abruptly (and effectively) shift into moments of rhetorical eloquence. At the beginning of the second act on page 60, Mary Magdalene waxes poetic as she describes Judas' relationship to Jesus:

MARY MAGDELENE. Judas was the shadow to Jesus' light. He was the sour to the sweet and the cool to the warm (Judas).

Mother Teresa exemplifies this combination of poetic and plain during her first act testimony on page 39 of Act 1, Scene 5:

MOTHER TERESA. Judas, he succumb to despair. The music of God's love and Grace kept playing, but he, he made himself hard of hearing-- like me no?" (Judas)

The text of Judas is also infused with legal and philosophical debate frequently volleyed back and forth in good O'Neillian fashion. An example excerpt between defense attorney Cunningham and Judge Littlefield shows off Girguis' expert hand in this type of realist legalese banter on page 23 of Act 1, Scene 3:

CUNNINGHAM. Your Honor, this petition is signed by God!

JUDGE LITTLEFIELD. Yeah, but it ain't signed by your client, now is it?

CUNNINGHAM. My client is catatonic, he's incapable of signing.

JUDGE LITTLEFIELD. If he's catatonic, then how do you know he was an appeal in the first place?

CUNNINGHAM. Who couldn't want to appeal "eternal damnation"?

JUDGE LITTLEFIELD. Someone who was aware of his own self-inflicted erosion of the capacity to be filled by Grace... Someone too prideful to ask for forgiveness even in the face of the fiery furnace. Or maybe, he don't bother askin', 'cuz he knows he don't deserve it!

CUNNINGHAM. Your Honor, the only person who needs forgiveness is the one who
doesn't deserve it.

JUDGE LITTLEFIELD. Then let him ask!

CUNNINGHAM. I'm asking for him! (Judas)

Guirgis is a versatile and gifted dialogist. The cunningly devised content and form of his text is what drew me to these characters. Throughout the process of working intimately on Judas my appreciation for Guirgis' writing has only increased.

CHARACTER

There are 27 different characters in Judas. Guirgis claimed that there were even more during the writing process, but, as the length of his play became unwieldy, he cut a few of them (Guigis). The characters are drawn from both history and Guirgis' imagination and can be split into four sub-categories: Courtroom Personnel, Saints & Supernaturals, 1st Century Folk, and 20th Century Folk. These groupings are partly based on in which of the three everlasting dimensions - Heaven, Hell or Purgatory - they reside and where they originated. The Courtroom Personnel constitute the principle characters who drive the action of the play.

This group includes Judge Littlefield, defense attorney Cunningham, prosecution attorney El-Fayoume, and the Bailiff. These four all reside in Purgatory. The Saints and Supernatural characters include Saint Matthew, Saint Monica, Saint Peter, Saint Thomas, Mary Magdalene, Satan and Jesus. These eight characters either started in Heaven or ended up in Heaven.

With the exception of Satan, they are all,

(Above, Guirgis distilling his characters)
coincidentally, in support of Judas' plight. The third band of characters are those whom Guirgis has drawn from history. Mother Teresa, Sigmund Freud, Pontius Pilat, Caiaphas the Elder, and Sister Glenna. This cohort primarily consists of witnesses called by council. The fourth grouping is a handful of additional Guirgis-invented personalities which include Henrietta Iscariot, Gloria, Loretta, Uncle Pino, the three Soldiers, and Butch Honeywell. This group is a cross-section of fictional characters from all three realms of the afterlife and serve a variety of functions in the story.

Guirgis' characters are compelling, especially the biblically-based ones, because they are uncharacteristically painted as ordinary, flawed people. A typical perception of the apostles is one of extreme pious saintliness. Father Jim recalls consulting with the Off-Broadway cast of Judas, "...we began talking about the inherent humanity of the disciples. Many Christians who are interested in the saints tend to overlook their natural feeling...But no saint was perfect. Holiness makes its home among human imperfections" (Martin 109). Guirgis understood this reality and took it to the extreme in his penning of the Saints. Saint Peter recalls his first meeting with Jesus Christ in Act I, Scene 5:

PETER. And this Jesus, who resembled a Messiah about as much as I resemble a ballerina in a tutu, strides on up to me and says, 'Catch any fish today?'...So I took Jesus out with me -- intending to throw his ass overboard...And what I didn't know then was that I would never see the sea again. (Judas)

In Act II, Scene 3, Saint Thomas is conversational and informal as he defends Judas' character

SAINT THOMAS. Judas was not a 'fall-back' guy, he was one hundred percent 'fall-forward.' And to me, that deserves some consideration. I was not fall forward. Not by a long shot. And neither were most of the others. Judas was a dick, but he deserved better. Just one Saint's opinion. (Judas 80)

Guirgis also produces his own colorful versions of Satan, Pontius Pilat and Caiaphas the Elder.
There is very little if any documentation on the personalities of these three biblical figures. Guirgis likely invented a personality profile by detailed research of what is known of these men. In her book, Pontius Pilat, for instance, Ann Wroe documents that "Pilat in Rome could often have observed Jewish rhythms of life-- the robes and beards, the hush of Friday evening, the hum of Saturday prayers. But he would probably not have cared to. Romans nursed some lively prejudices against Jews..." (62). Bruce Chilton writes in his biography of Mary Magdalene; "By virtue of what she did, what she taught, and who she was, Mary Magdalene emerged as the most influential woman in Rabbi Jesus' movement. She also proved his persistent partner during the most fraught period of his life" (47). By grafting these types of scholarly accounts with his creative impulses, Guirgis brought vitality and humanity to these characters. Mary Magdalene's description of her relationships with Jesus and Judas at the top of the second act on page 59 is a perfect example:

MARY MAGDALENE. But, I am pretty sure that I was his best friend. We shared an intimacy that I cannot put to words except to say we saw into each other's hearts and were in love with what we found...

MARY MAGDALENE. I also knew Judas Iscariot very well.

SAINT MONICA. Gangsta!

MARY MAGDALENE. Out of the twelve, he was the most moody and the most impetuous, and yet, he was my favorite.

SAINT MONICA. Tupac!

MARY MAGDALENE. And in some ways, I think he was Jesus' favorite too... Judas was almost an alter ego to Jesus-- he was the shadow to Jesus' light... (Judas)
VII. DESIGN

SET

One of the most valuable lessons I learned from my 2nd year graduate directing professor Mary Robinson was about set design. Robinson stressed how important it is for a set design to have "fluidity". This fluidity allows the design to be a flexible, living organism that can physically shift and transform according to the needs of the play. In her book *Directing Plays Directing People*, Robinson points out that "...it is best to leave some decisions to solve in rehearsal, as long as the set designer can draft the basic set and turn it over to the scene shop. There's a danger that if we pin everything down too exactly now, the use of the set will become overly explicit and tell the story of the play all by itself, rather than enabling the actors and me to make those discoveries when we rehearse" (46). Peter Brook similarly comments on this subject in his book, *The Empty Space* when he states, "What is necessary, however, is an incomplete design: a design that has clarity without rigidity...This is the essence of theatrical thinking: a true theatre designer will think of his designs as being all the time in motion, in action, in relation to what the actor brings to a scene as it unfolds" (101). I made a concerted effort to bring this philosophy of set design process into my meetings with *Judas* set designer, Sofia Claudino. Together we worked to create a set that had the capacity to flex into many different configurations. The majority of the smaller set pieces could be moved about the deck by one or two actors. The mobility of these items, such as the witness chair and judicial bench which...
were both on casters, was crucial in creating a flexible playing space. There were also two permanently anchored units; the Jury Platform and the Judas Pyramid defendant seat that were bolted to the floor. These were the largest pieces of the set and were placed as far upstage center as possible. The Jury box was a 5.5 foot raised platform that sat nine members in individual chairs. The Judas Pyramid would sit directly downstage of the platform. On both the stage left and stage right of the platform was a staircase for fluid egress. There was a good amount of trouble-shooting in order for Sofia and me to determine this as the most effective and aesthetically pleasing solution for the Jury placement. The platform succeeded in getting the jury members away from the main playing space, but also allowed them to remain as an important part of the action. The staircases proved to be excellent perches from which actors could play at higher levels.

(Below, Judas set with Jury platform & Pyramid at left).

There was one major design component to the set that we abandoned at the last minute. It was likely going to present some serious staging challenges. Early in the process I suggested a manually powered turntable similar to one I'd seen in a recent Soho Rep production. We were
going to place this 10 ft. Diameter rotating unit at center stage. Mary Robinson identified this as a major obstacle that would dramatically reduce my staging options within the strongest playing area of the deck. This unit was also going to eat up a fair amount of our very small design budget. Just hours before the scene shop was to purchase the materials, we scratched it from the design and averted what might have been a minor disaster. My obsession with the turntable as an exciting scenic element was pulling my focus away from what the play really needed - an uncluttered central playing area from which the characters could clearly communicate the story to the audience.

In early design discussions, the creative team produced images of various urban locations either in various states of decay or abandonment. Also shared were images of purgatorial-inspired places that pushed toward the abstract. Unlike Steinbeck or O'Neill, Guirgis leaves much to the imagination in his stage directions. We know from the script of *Judas* only that the play takes place in a "courtroom" in a New York City-esque purgatorial place called "Hope". It is common practice to identify a central visual metaphor for a set design, and I was intent on finding one that would excite my creative team. I knew that the metaphor would unite us in a more tightly focused design. William Ball says that, "It is essential that the director and both designers agree; there must be a three-way agreement on the metaphor, because the metaphor will be a limiting factor for all three of us in the preparation of the production" (97). After deliberating several possible options that included a delapatepted theater, a freeway overpass, a remnant world's fair structure, a cyper-punk wasteland and a deserted tuberculosis hospital, we settled on a decommissioned subway station. The station had to serve as a courtroom as well, so we treated it as a repurposed space not unlike a post-apocolyptic improvised location seen in films such as the *Mad Max* Trilogy. Additionally, a subway station was an ideal location as it represented a place of transition just like Purgatory. Furthermore, it fit squarely into an urban environment. We named the station "Hope Street" and gave it an uptown side ("Heaven")
and a downtown side ("Hell"). In rehearsal we identified each of the four exits in our thrust space as A) Heaven, B) Hell, C) Judge's chambers D) Hallway, outside of courtroom. By specifically labeling each entrance portal, we gave the actors a more grounded sense of where they were coming from and where they were going to. We enhanced the design with paint and poster treatments that reflected a 2004 New York City subway station. The Jury sat on what might be identified as the "subway platform" and the lawyers sat on benches that mimicked NYC MTA benches. The defendant's seat, or in our case the Judas Pyramid, was the most impressionistic element of the design. We looked to images of collapsed subways such as the Fulton street station in the wake of 9/11. Judas' world was essentially crushing him, and we wanted him seated in an entrapment that symbolized his inability to move forward spiritually. Sofia had a strong impression that the unit should be triangular in shape, and the final design was a stunning and practical sculpture that harmonized with the spine of the play.

(Left, Judas Design team with research images)

COSTUMES

Before I considered pitching this play to the thesis committee, I was advised to consult Costume Design Professor, Teresa Snider-Stein, about the excessive costume count. The 27
different characters in *Judas* equated to 27 separate costumes. The official costume limit for thesis productions is 13. I had some pitching to do. Professor Snider-Stein and I determined that the design could lean heavily on existing stock and would offer a great opportunity for a creative graduate designer. The Brooklyn College Theater Department has a wonderful stock of clothing to pull from and a cracker-jack wardrobe supervisor named Deborah Hertzberg. I was assigned to one of the best graduate costume designers in the department, Xindi Xu.

Xindi (pronounced Shin-dee) came into the first design meeting with a collection of impressionistic photos that proved to me that she was an artist. Xindi's approach to a design is not only meticulous and detailed, but full of creative impulses that explode with color and texture. *Judas'* setting of "Hope" was described in the script as a place that "changes with the times" as Gloria stated in the first act. Xindi and I decided that the process of "keeping up with the times" would also apply to the characters and how they dressed. I proposed to Xindi that we create two columns for each character; Column A, representing the historically accurate origin-point of the character, and column B, representing the 2004 version of the character. To illustrate, the Column A character of Jesus would be in a tunic or himation woven of goat or sheep's wool. The column B Jesus would be outfitted in a contemporary shirt and pants woven of a similar fabric and color to that of column A.

Our place setting of an MTA subway station was another strong influencer of the costume design. We choose to hybridize the courtroom.
personnel clothing with MTA employee uniforms. Judge Littlefield's judicial robe also contained elements of an MTA booth agent's clothing and the Bailiff costume echoed that of an MTA police officer. The entire cast, in fact, was to appear as if they were plucked off a New York City Subway platform at rush hour sometime in 2004. The clothing was to embody and support the metaphor of the set.

There was a handful of challenging costumes that required extra amounts of elbow grease and mental contemplation. One costume that is specifically described in the script is Satan's "Gucci" suit. This kind of contemporary piece of fashion was not readily available in the Brooklyn College Costume supply and to purchase a suit of this kind would have cost upwards of $1,000. Fortunately, Brooklyn College Costume Draper, Sarah Iams, was able to build a brand-new, hand-crafted "Gucci" suit based on Xindi's design for a fraction of the price. The suit was one of two pieces built especially for our production, and it was beautiful. As the character of Satan, actor Eric Smith was thrilled to wear it each night in performance.

The casting of Judas required seven actors in total to be double-cast or triple-cast. There were moments when these actors were required to abruptly switch characters in a short amount of time. These quick changes required creative engineering in the design of the clothing. Actor Sarvin Alidee, for example, had to metamorphose from her jury member character into Mother Teresa in a matter of moments. Xindi designed a sari for Mother Teresa that could be quickly wrapped over Sarvin's base costume. The total transformation from juror to Mother Teresa took about 30 seconds, and it was a captivating moment of stage magic. The results of what Xindi put on the stage as her Judas costume design far exceeded my expectations, particularly considering the limited budget. It was an inventive and beautiful design that succeeded in unifying the actors to the rest the physical elements of the production.
LIGHTING

Judas lighting designer Jane Silverstein is an artist with a lot of ideas. When I first worked with her on the Brooklyn College One-Act Festival a year ago, she came into our first meeting talking about "lasers shooting from the eyes of cats." This immediately put me on edge, and I assumed that I had a juvenile delinquent for a lighting designer. Fortunately, Jane turned out not to be a child but a savvy designer whose abstract ideas always morphed into solid, coherent design concepts. From the very beginning of the process, Jane categorized the illumination of this play into three different "worlds" of light; "Courtroom", "Elsewhere" and "Flashback". The Courtroom light was associated with the main trial scenes involving the lawyers, the judge, jury and witnesses. "Elsewhere" was identified with scenes that included Angels, Saints, and God. Finally, the "Flashback" category was identified with scenes that went back in time to revisit specific moments in Judas' past. Several design aspects are worth mentioning, including our "Subway Transition" cues, "Angel Wings" and the "Black Light Specials."

We wanted some lighting cues to reflect the atmosphere of an MTA station. The clearest opportunity for this was during the transitions. Jane had installed a series of Color Force Pars in a large square pattern in the grid which echoed the perimeter of the stage. We programmed these lights in a variety of patterns that trailed the entire square like a toy train. This was accompanied by the sound of a subway roaring through the station. It was programmed to either strobe along the light path or smoothly race around like a speeding comet with a trail of stardust.
We adjusted the color of this light train for every transition. There were approximately eight of these transitions throughout the play. Another special element of the design was Gloria's angel wings. The script specifically called for wings, and I felt it was important to honor that. I did not, however, want a literal depiction of wings as it would create only one character in the play with something "inhuman" as part of her costume. I felt that literal wings would disrupt the physical unity of the design. Xindi produced a series of impressionistic photos of wings sculpted from a variety of materials. Nothing physical seemed to resonate with the team. I asked if the wings could have an ethereal quality to them. Someone, I forget whom, suggested that the wings appear and disappear in the form of a light projection. We loved this idea. The challenge was where to project the image and how to attach it to Tabitha Perez, the actor playing Gloria. After considerable brain-storming, I ended up staging Tabitha to briefly lie down on the floor at a specific time and place at which point we projected the wings down on the deck on either side of her torso. The effect worked, and for a few magical moments an angel with wings appeared to
the audience. The cue worked properly 3 out of the 6 shows, but it was quite effective when successfully executed. The projection solution also solved the potential awkwardness of physical wings attached to Tabitha as she sat in a chair as a jury member. Another simple yet very effective element of our lighting design was the use of an eight foot fluorescent tube-light. Jane wanted to include this type of light as part of the courtroom look. This light provided a powerfully bright and sober feeling of municipality onstage. The physical presence of the instrument itself also acted as a valuable set piece as it was clearly visible from the audience. It completed the picture of the trial room. There was one technical issue with this light however, as it required a lot of power to activate. As a result, would occasionally overload the system. These little moments of electrical overload (deviously termed a "leprechuan trip" by stage management) would break the circuit and automatically power down all of the channels that this and many other lights were plugged into. On a few occasions we lost about a third of our lights during tech and in performance. I will say, however, that it was worth it! The New Workshop Theater was a lovely and intimate space that generated many beautiful intimate moments of light, and Jane's work on Judas made a lasting impression on me.

SOUND

The sound design of Judas was a vitally important element of the production, and the creation of an evocative, aural atmosphere was necessary to ground the more ethereal scenes of the play. Of Jane Silverstein's three worlds of light, it was the Flashback world that required the most sound augmentation. Sound designer Dominique Nelson and I worked meticulously on finding just the right effects to accompany locations such as Judas' Cave in Hell, a Judean marketplace and "Bathsheeba's Bar and Grill" where Satan seduces Judas just hours after he betrays Jesus. The sounds we found or created were subtle but specific and took many hours to assemble. We searched through over 50 different sound files, for instance, before we identified the perfect sewer-water trickle that sounded underneath the Saint Monica and Judas scene in
Act 1, Scene 2. We sifted through a multitude of camel calls before landing on the one with just the right blend of grunt, gargle and bark to play underneath the Matthias and Judas scene in Act 1, Scene 4. There were two additional components of the sound design to Judas; the pre-show soundscape and music, which were fundamental aids in shaping the tone of the play.

In correlation with the subway station location, Dominique and I collaborated on an atmospheric pre-show sound-scape that mimicked a New York City Subway station. Over the course of one month, I recorded over a dozen sound clips during my subway commute from Washington Heights to Flatbush, Brooklyn. With my cell phone, I captured the sound of subway buskers, commuter arguments, train car proselytizers, and the rantings of mentally-ill homeless men. I also sourced a handful of Youtube videos of similar types of recordings taken by other urban ethno-recorders. Once my sound collection was complete, I handed off the raw material to Dominique who digitally stitched it all together into what became our pre-show sound scape. Not only did it fill the awkward pre-show silence of an audience-in-waiting, but it initiated the narrative before the play's formal action began.

Music was an important component of our production. There were several moments in the play that required music and a few moments in which we managed to invent a requirement where none had been. The most prevalent period of music was during intermission. Dominique and I determined that we’d time-stamp the music to 2004 or earlier in order to stay consistent with the indicated time-period. This worked well as a gauge; however we did cheat on a couple of tunes. We selected songs that reflected both the Christian theme of the play and its urban location. The nexus of these two categories led us to a playlist with artists such as U2, Pato Bantan, Bobby McFerrin and 2Pac Shakur. One of my song choices sparked a disagreement a few weeks before opening. I very much wanted Kanye West's, "Jesus Walks" which was, in my opinion, a powerful and catchy song with content that was relevant to the play. During a sound meeting Dominique brought up the song and asked that I reconsider including it in our playlist.
She explained that in her cultural circle Kanye West represented someone who did not have the African-American community's best interest at heart. She described a shared sense of abandonment felt by her and others in regard to the struggle for the rights of Blacks in America. Naima Cochrain of Billboard Magazine wrote in October of 2019: "In many Black conversations online, in print and in person, the tone regarding Kanye used to be a bemused but still warm and sometimes empathetic recap of his antics -- a “bless his heart.” Sentiment is now overwhelmingly “enough of him, already,” or even a straight “f--k Kanye” (Cochrain). While I was fond of the song, I felt that it was more important to honor my collaboration with Dominique and the black community. Therefore, I took it off the list.

A good illustration of an invented musical moment involved the Entr'acte coming out of intermission. Judas is a lengthy play, and I thought it wise to re-energize the audience with a bit of music and dance. I devised a story-driven moment wherein several characters who reside in Heaven entered the stage dancing. Standing on the outskirts of this dance party were the courtroom personnel who remained in Purgatory. Satan was also there, fiendishly dancing

(Above, Judas cast Entr'acte dancing)
amidst the celebrants. Judas sullenly entered and "killed the music" so to speak as he walked straight through the dancing throng to his pyramid enclosure. As Judas passed each character, they would cease their joyous movement and then slowly exit. Jesus maintained his dancing, however, as if he were trying to snap Judas out of his eternal funk. As the music faded, Jesus danced off-stage leaving behind Mary Magdalene and Saint Monica to begin the second act. In my extensive musical research, I discovered a band called Balkan Beat Box or "BBB". Their song "Hermetico" was the perfect soundtrack for this "beat" of the play. BBB is an Israeli music group that plays Mediterranean-influenced music that incorporates Jewish, Southeastern Europe and Middle Eastern traditions. Their goal is to take ancient and traditional music and fuse them with hip hop in order to create a new mix of musical styles that would appeal to listeners in a club or a dancehall (Wikipedia). Needless to say, the felicitous pairing of this band with Guirgis's play could not have been more inspired. As the lights faded out on the end of the play, Dominique and I selected a song called "Paralyzed" by a Christian rapper called NF. The lyrics speak to the apropos nature of Judas' state at the end of the play:

I'M PARALYZED
WHERE ARE MY FEELINGS?
I NO LONGER FEEL THINGS
I KNOW I SHOULD
I'M PARALYZED
WHERE IS THE REAL ME?
I'M LOST AND IT KILLS ME INSIDE
I'M PARALYZED

VIII. REHEARSAL

STAGE MANAGEMENT

The stars aligned when Production Manager, Niluka Hotaling, assigned senior Theater BFA, Dailee Morrone to be my stage manager for Judas. Without her cogent efficiency and thoughtful steering of this theatrical ship, we would have floundered on the rocks of disorganization shortly after setting sail. Our first order of business before going into rehearsals
was putting together a schedule. The rehearsal hours allotted for MFA Thesis productions at Brooklyn College is geared primarily for 90-minute, one-act plays and to properly rehearse our 2 hour and 45 minute play, we had to have a well-thought out schedule. Planning was not easy as our daily agendas shifted continually based on my directorial needs with the actors. Nothing ever really goes as planned, and the flexibility that Dailee and her trusty ASM Alex Harte-Torres maintained in keeping us on schedule was phenomenal. Dailee and her team, which often included my assistant director, Elissa, created an effective rehearsal tracking system to help monitor our progress. We allotted two rehearsal slots for table work, and the third pass was devoted to staging. As we navigated the availability of 17 college actors with hectic work schedules, demanding school duties, and frequent bouts of colds and flu, we found ourselves in a constant state of backtracking and re-combing through untouched or barely touched scene material. Dailee's rehearsal tracking system became more refined in the second week with color-coding and priority markers.

As managers of people, Dailee and Alex did a wonderful job keeping the company calm and well informed. We had few, if any, real personnel problems. Dailee was a savvy tracker of

(Below, Stage Manager, Dailee)
actor emotions and always helped me navigate through the rough patches when actors were feeling low or unstable. Once we got into the theater, Dailee took appropriate charge of the room and led the cast and crew safely and quietly into the abyss of tech. Dailee was a diligent and accurate cue caller during performances and helped maintain the technical integrity of each performance. I hope very much to collaborate again with her in the future.

**TABLE WORK**

*Judas* is a densely written 103 pages of text. Due to its length and heavy subject matter, I conducted an extended period of table work on the play. Our first three days were devoted to ensemble-building exercises and discussions. I brought in a very large speaker from which I began testing show music out on the cast to gauge their reaction. I also used the music as accompaniment for group warm ups at the top of each rehearsal. It was important to me that the cast become physical at the beginning of the process. I agree with Ann Bogart's philosophy that "A director's job is to be connected to the stage physically, imaginatively, and emotionally" (Bogart 74). In addition to the physical work, I strove from the first day to get intimately connected to my actors through the ideas and words of the play.

There were several activities that I worked on with the cast as a full company and also as individuals that are worth discussing. On the second day of rehearsal, I sat down with each cast member for ten minutes to have a personal discussion. This vital face time enabled me to check in and begin to understand what the needs would be of each actor in the process of mounting this play. It also gave the actors an opportunity to speak to me about their parts and process before we got too overwhelmed with rehearsals. Another memorable activity was a series of group exercises that allowed the actors to explore relationships strictly through movement and dance. These exercises were always accompanied by music. A particularly memorable exercise was when I played a recreation of an Ancient Roman piece of music using cithara, aulos, and drums. The song was recorded by Synaulia, a team of musicians, archeologists,
paleorganologists and choreographers dedicated to the application of their historical research to ancient music and dance, in particular to the ancient Etruscan and Roman periods. (Wikipedia) The song was of a particularly intense tone and had haunting female vocals within it. I asked the cast to recreate, in pantomime, the story of the events leading up to and including the execution of Christ. Each actor was to play the role of their character in relation to the event of Christ's death. We started with Palm Sunday, and I vocally prompted them through each moment up to the moment when Judas committed suicide by hanging himself on a tree. I also adjusted the lights as the pantomime progressed, making the room dimmer with each beat. The actors commitment to each beat was sincere and full. The room became concave under the weight of what we had recreated. We all required several moments of silence to reform ourselves back to reality. It was one of the most riveting and provocative rehearsals I've ever held. Of course, the practicality of the pantomime was the great reward as it gave everyone a visceral sense of what it may have been like to experience the betrayal, torture and loss of a great leader and beloved peer.

The "Honeymoon" period of the first three days continued with the creation of character analysis charts. In her book *Unmasking Theatre Design*, Lynn Porter documents a play analysis technique in which the designer color codes specific facts about a character in the script and
then transfers the information into a visual format called a "mind-map" (115). I took this same exercise and created an expanded version for the actors to prepare in rehearsal. I gave each performer a large piece of yellow chart paper with a blank square in the middle. I then asked them to complete Porter's analysis exercise and draw the mind-map on the chart paper. Within the blank square, I instructed them to create a piece of visual art that represented their character. This activity enabled the actors to respond to their characters textually and artistically. I discovered that some of my cast were talented visual artists. Tabitha Perez was an especially gifted artist and ended up designing the template for her own angel wings for the part of Gloria. (Below, Tabitha's character chart & Right, her angel wings)

Research is one of the things I most enjoy in preparing to direct a play or musical and the research content of Judas was virtually never-ending. From biblical biographies to theological theory books to existentialist manifestos, I looked into almost every idea this play suggested in the text. I was curious as to
how I could encourage the cast in their research and also make use of their time when they were in the room but not actively working with me. I decided to create a separate space in the rehearsal room that would be reserved for study, and I also wanted that space to be an inviting and comforting place. The result was the "Judas Library". In 2004, I participated in an SDC Observership on the Sam Mendes-directed production of Gypsy, starring Bernadette Peters. On the first day of rehearsals, Mr. Mendes had a large Persian type rug set out in the middle of the rehearsal room with several large throw pillows scattered about it. He proceeded to use the devised space for the next two days as an improvisatory comfort zone wherein the actors played and experimented with some of the more intimate scenes of the musical. It was a profound gesture, and I never forgot it. I copied Mr. Mendes' rug and pillow idea with my Judas Library and created a similar comfort zone in the corner of my rehearsal room with a large rug and pillows. I had ASM Alex set up all of the research books that I'd collected on a shelf next to the rug. My experiment was a success. The company used the Judas Library to research, study their lines, quietly watch rehearsal and sometimes catch up on much needed sleep with a nap. It was a place of rest and meditation for which the cast was grateful.

As actors chilled out in the library waiting for their turn on the floor, I held intense table-work conversations with the company, scene by scene for four days on each act. These discussions would prove to be of great value in the coming weeks as countless new questions...
could be resolved about character backstory, intentions, arcs and super-objectives as a result of our detailed work at the table. I also recorded every conversation with my cell phone and uploaded the recordings into a shared google folder. In writing this thesis, I went back and listened to these recordings and found them to be a remarkable record of our play analysis. The recordings also allowed actors to experience discussions which they missed due to illness.

**STAGING**

Ann Bogart claims that "Art is violent" and that "To be decisive is violent...To place a chair at a particular angle on the stage destroys every other possible choice, every other option" (Bogart 45). After a week of basking in the safety of table work, it was time to begin to sculpt the physical action of the play. The thought of doing this did indeed feel "violent" and scary. Bogart's observation on the disastrous nature of blocking a scene resonated with me.

The first day that I put something "on its feet" while directing *Judas* came as a surprise to me. I had begun the rehearsal that day expecting another session of table work when Dailee informed me that the scene was on its third pass, indicating it was time to block it. I quickly changed modes and quickly set out some set pieces and loosely assigned entrances for the five characters in Act I, Scene 1. I discovered that the setup of the furniture was not working, but I forged ahead anyway. I became increasingly confused and frustrated over the course of the next hour as I improvised blocking ideas and desperately tried to match the action to the words. The actors seemed lost and the purpose of the scene seemed completely absent. I would discover the next day that the actors were fine and the progress of the scene had moved forward despite how unstable I was feeling inside. However, the hour of difficulty confirmed that making decisions in the act of staging a play is a perilous affair full of risks one must take in order to succeed.

Staging *Judas* was a process that came in a series of waves. The first pass involved letting the actors roam and explore at their whim while I chaperoned them through their
intentions and objectives. This period took up most of the time in rehearsal as I believed it vitally important to focus on the character's psychological wants and needs. I intentionally did not set any blocking too early as I wanted to give ample room for the intuition of the actors. The next wave of blocking came in a bit of a rush immediately following our first stumble-through of the entire play. Mary Robinson attended the run and gave me wise counsel that it was time to give the actors some solid blocking. I needed this permission to set movement on my acting company. I was earnestly attempting to allow the blocking to organically appear from our textual work and was neglecting my natural movement skills as a choreographer. The play, especially the second act, was in dire need of some physical shaping. I found not only that the staging came easy but that the actors were ready, willing and eager to accept it. The final wave of staging came in the technical process as we began to interact with the set. In rehearsal we used approximate measurements and stand-in rehearsal furniture for much of the blocking. Once we arrived in the theater, the true dimensions of our play world would dictate many new staging ideas.

My process for staging a scene in Judas was very similar to my procedure for choreographing a dance number. I begin creating a dance by thoroughly studying the music or in the case of Judas, the text of the play. Next, I teach the movement vocabulary of the dance. For Judas, the "vocabulary" of staging translates into the physical interaction the actors had with the set and all its various bits of furniture and props. In a dance, I would then string together the phrases of moment to create larger sections. With Judas, this assembly process took the form of pairing the actor's intentions with their physical actions and, in addition, stringing beats together to form larger blocks of text in action. The final similarity was in the form of my notation method of performer traffic patterns. My sketches for Judas blocking looked very similar to my dance maps with "x's" for bodies and myriad arrows and lines to signify stage patterns. While there are far more physical moments within a dance phrase, a scene in Judas encompassed an
Edward Albee loved music, especially classical music. He claimed that writing a play such as *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* was similar to composing a string quartet (Albee). Michel Saint-Denis cites Copeau's statement that plays of great heightened language "should be performed in a small auditorium made of wood, where the sound of the text would have the quality of chamber music; the tone of voices, the variety of pitch, the positions of the characters, their extreme economy of movement and gesture, all must be arranged so that nothing should trouble the air but beautiful sound and rare motion" (Saint-Denis 22). To this extent, I believe, as these great theater practitioners did, that directing a play is akin to conducting an orchestra. Throughout the staging of *Judas*, I did indeed get the sense of conducting as I pursued, in collaboration with the actors, a compelling shape of the action. I helped sculpt each player's track and made adjustments for tone, speed, and attack. I monitored how the entire company mixed with each other onstage and did my utmost to ensure that each performance was peaking and dipping at an appropriate and organic time. I often
interpreted the dialogue as I would interpret sheet music and adhered to the punctuation in the same way I would follow the measurements of time in a musical score. However, Saint-Denis asks "Is that enough? Certainly not. Without dramatic motivation, such a reading might only lead to a more or less beautiful declamation of the text devoid of much meaning" (Saint-Denis 67). In accordance with this philosophy, I directed Judas with attention to both musicality and psychological motivation.

IX. INTO THE THEATER

TECHNICAL REHEARSALS

Tech rehearsal seemed to arrive, as it always does, too early. Moving into the theater was both terrifying and exhilarating. On the one hand, I felt unprepared to enter the theater, craving several more weeks of exploration in the safety of the rehearsal hall. But, on the other hand, I, along with everyone else, was energized by the addition of the physical world of our play. Fortunately, we had two days in the theater before tech officially began. The set was still in the process of being painted but every physical element that the actors needed to interact with was in place. These two days proved to be incredibly productive as we accomplished significant catch-up work on several unfinished chunks of the play.

We began throwing lights and sound on the play on the Saturday after Thanksgiving. It is said that the first 5 minutes of a show take the longest to tech and Judas was no exception to the rule. Dominique (sound), Jane (lights), stage manager Dailee and I all had to find our pacing together. Progress was slow at first as Jane had pre-written her cues without the expectation that I might want to adjust them. After a couple of awkward hours, we took a break and were able to have a conversation that clarified everyone's expectations. Once we got our rhythm we made good progress. As I was now fully focused on lights, sound and cueing, I delegated my actor-notes to assistant-director Elissa who was an incredible aid during this time. Not only was she an effective proxy, she also worked with a handful of our less experienced actors and
helped them improve their performances.

Tech truly pushed my design team to the utmost of their abilities. Jane's design was creative and thematically thorough. The challenge she faced was to get sufficient light on the action of the play. We increased the boldness and brightness of her design significantly from the start of the tech process to opening night and beyond we continued to increase the wattage on stage. We were somewhat limited in light coverage of the stage as well and had to find creative solutions to shine lumens on some notoriously dark spots of the set. The Jury platform in particular was difficult to light because of its high position that was beyond the reach of most of the instruments. There is a profoundly elusive alchemy in the shedding of light on a play with all its moving parts, but we eventually found the right balance.

Dominique and I had our work cut out for us in tech. Not only was there an abundance of sound cues to finish building and mixing, but Dominique, new to sound design, was learning much of her craft on the job. Fortunately, she is cool-under-pressure and is an innately intelligent person. She also had good artistic taste which gave her the ability to recognize what works and what doesn't in a sound design. As stated earlier, I found much of the raw material for the sound of the play, but Dominique, self-educating on the sound program software Q-Lab, was able to engineer our cues with relative ease. One of the main challenges we faced was finding the right balance of sound in the theater. Sourcing of sound according to the location of the action on stage was an ongoing process which required much fine-tuning. The aural and electrical engineering aspect of the design proved to be a demanding task throughout tech as
well. The previously mentioned "leprechauns" not only tripped the lighting instruments but the speakers as well. One of our final dress rehearsals had no sound at all which made us nervous for the upcoming opening. Fortunately, the performances went on without any major sound glitches and the quality and pitch of the design improved with every run.

PERFORMANCES

Peter Brook said "The only thing that all forms of theatre have in common is the need for an audience. This is more than a truism: in the theatre the audience completes the steps of creation" (Brook 127). It seems that no matter how "behind" a production feels in its preparedness to perform, the cast is ready for an audience by opening night. I admit that most of the time I do not share this same feeling of readiness. With this production of Judas, however, I was ready to put the action in front of a crowd. Not every detail was perfectly polished, but I knew that an audience was going to help spark my cast into the next level of life. Every actor and running crew member was firing on all cylinders coming out of tech, and the opening night performance was strong and full of

(Above, Rae Mizrachi and Kevin Herrera making great chemistry)
vitality. Not surprisingly, the first and last performances of our six-show run were the best shows. Opening night was like a first kiss, full of expectation, wonder and the unexpected. Closing night was like a going away party for a dear friend, full of nostalgia and passion.

Throughout the run of performances I witnessed the fruits of my labor bloom and also waited in vain for some seeds that never sprouted. Within the cast I had a couple of student actors whose abilities were still quite green. One actor, Angel Valesquez, had two different roles and struggled to bring them both up to the same strong level. His first character, Saint Peter, was quite effective. Angel communicated powerfully as Saint Peter and had an impressive physical and vocal presence. His second character was a young-boy version of Matthias of Galilee. This role was a much greater challenge to Angel and me. Angel was determined that Matthias was a shy and sad boy and, as a result, played him in a quiet and somewhat defeated manner. His speech, at times, was barely audible and he often spoke into the floor. I was determined to help Angel find some motivation to strengthen this character. I encouraged him to behave with no vocal filter and to speak to Judas without inhibitions as children naturally do. Angel often made great progress in rehearsal, but once on stage, he pulled his energy back and became meek again. I used every trick, technique and exercise I could think of to help him maintain a strong presence in performance, but nothing helped. At times it was endlessly frustrating, and eventually I had to throw in the towel and let it be. Both Ball and Bloom stress the importance of hiring an experienced actor over an inexperienced actor when faced with a casting tiebreaker. This is educational theater however, and while the experience was challenging, it was valuable. I discovered that some things are out of my reach as a director, and perhaps Angel learned how elusive theatrical performance can sometimes be.

Many actors soared well beyond the target I'd anticipated for them, delivering detailed and captivating performances. One such actor was Eric Smith in the role of Satan. As one of three graduate students (the others being Kevin Herrera turning in an absolute Tony-Worthy
performance as prosecuting attorney
El-Fayoume and Shaquille Nelson
as Pontius Pilat), Eric began the
rehearsal process on somewhat
unsteady ground with his
interpretation of Satan. In early
rehearsals Eric was indicating a
caricature of Satan and not yet
finding real actions or intentions. He
confided to me that this was his first
"serious" role and up until this point
he'd always been cast in character roles. He was consistently leaning on circumstances that
lacked any real depth. For instance when I asked what he wanted from Judas in his Act One
encounter at "Bathsheeba's Bar and Grill", Eric stated he wanted to have sex with Judas. Sex is
just a tactic to get something of much greater significance. Over time Eric and I worked together
to discover that Satan had much more at stake than the loss or gain of physical pleasure. Satan
was, as we would discover, locked in a cosmic battle with God. Not only was Satan's
possession of souls at stake but his existence in the holy realm was in jeopardy as well. What
was even more practical was our revelation that Satan was an authentic being. He could be
played as realistically as a rich land owner in a Chekhov play. Eric ended up delivering one of
the most compelling and entertaining performances I'd seen at Brooklyn College, hands down. I
was so proud of his work that I would not hesitate to hire him in a professional production of
Judas. There were countless additional details of my work with the Judas actors, but as the
Apostle John wrote in his Gospel accord on the works of Christ, "if every one of them were
written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be
written." (John. 21.25).

X. CONCLUSION

At the end of the play, Butch Honeywell confesses to the catatonic Judas his regret for the betrayal of his wife on earth, "She was my poem, Mister Iscariot. Her and the kids. But mostly...her...You cashed in Silver, Mister Iscariot, but me? I threw away Gold...That's a fact. That's a natural fact." Butch cannot, or will not, allow himself to be forgiven of his sinful action, and it is a fitting reflection against our protagonist. I will steal the metaphor and say that this play was not silver but gold to me. I'm so grateful to have had the opportunity to direct the piece and then reflect upon it through the writing of this document. I will soon be at the end of my thesis journey and will graduate and move on to other things. I shall take with me the good lessons of my time here at Brooklyn College and apply them wherever I go. All good things must come to an end, so in the words of Pontius Pilate in Act II, scene 5 on his way out of the courtroom and into a 2PM tee-time in Heaven...."I'm a roll out, now, boo--work on my short game" (Judas 90).


Below, Judas Production Book - putting on weight

Below, piles of reference materials

Director’s Note

"Despair... is the ultimate development of a pride so great and so stiff-necked that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God and thereby acknowledge that He is above us and that we are not capable of fulfilling our destiny by ourselves."

-Sister Glenna, The Last Days of Judas Iscariot
Left, early set design with center turntable

Right, Director's mock up of set with dubious turntable

Left, the final set plans
Left, departmental poster for *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*

Right, cast flyer for *Judas*

Left, online Judas flyer created by cast member Rae Mizrachi
THE LAST DAYS OF JUDAS ISCARIOT - Character costume description

TIME PERIOD: Contemporary, now

SPN - primary character - sinister, erotic, deceptive

GLOHAM - primary character - an angel

MOTHER TERESA - secondary character - mother of the downtrodden - one scene

JUDAS ISCARIOT - primary character - legal & regal, noble

CARRIA THE YEUDER - secondary character - conservative, frugal, one scene

ST. MATTHEW - tertiary character - former tax collector, apostle, holy saint - part of the scene

LORETTA - primary character - hopeful, patient, dying

MARY MAGDALENE - secondary character - passionate, authentic - one scene

SISTER GLANNA - tertiary character - Irish nun - part of one scene

BEAUF - primary character - court officer - duty bound, on the job, high and tight

SMITH THE ZEALOT - secondary costume - militant, a zealot - one scene

JUDAS ISCARIOT - primary character - former apostle, now a holy saint - one scene

TODD J - tertiary character - Roman soldier - one scene

PORTIA PLLIN - primary character - Roman in command

UNCLE PINO - secondary character - Loretta's drunk uncle - has one line in play

MATTHIAS OF GALLA - primary character - a boy sharing tree with Jesus - one scene

ST. PETER - secondary character - former apostle, now a holy saint - one scene

DOLIVEZ - tertiary character - Roman soldier - one scene

MRS. METCALF - primary character - The Voice of God - one scene

JUDAS ISCARIOT - primary character - a fallen apostle, on trial - one scene

ST. MONICA - primary character - a chosen but good angel

CICERO II - secondary character - Roman soldier - one scene

FRANCIS IN CROWN - primary character - mother of Judas - one scene

MAY HONEYWELL - primary character - casual Canadian college teacher - one scene

FABIANA ASTU CUNNINGHAM - primary character - Defense attorney, man eater, licentious - one scene

TURF EL ROYALTY - primary character - prosecuting attorney - flashy, tight & aggressive - one scene


Left, costume plot with costume breakdown

The Last Days of Judas Iscariot
By Stephen Adly Guirgis
Directed by Matthew Williams

Set Designer Sofia Claudino
Costume Designer Xindi Xu
Lighting Designer Jane Silverstein
Sound Designer Dominique Nelson
Props Master Andrej Nawoj
Stage Manager Dailee Morrone

Cast
Yusef El-Fayoume
Fabiana Aziza Cunningham
Judge Littlefield/Caiphas the Elder/ St. Matthew
Judas Iscariot
Jesus of Nazareth
Bailiff/Simon the Zealot
Henrietta Iscariot
Satan
Gloria
Mother Teresa
Santa Monica/Soldier #2
Sigmund Freud/St. Thomas/Soldier #1
Matthias of Galle/Glise/St. Peter/Soldier #3
Pontius Pilate/Uncle Pino
Mary Magdelene/Loretta/Sister Glenna
Butch Honeywell
U/S Bailiff/Simon the Zealot

Kevin Herrera
Rae Mizrachi
Mariah Sanchez
Ryan Bannan
Gary Chung
Dara Mellon
Amanda Enzo
Eric Smith
Tabitha Perez
Sarvin Alidaee
Angelia Katherine
Jeremy Rosenblum
Angel Velasquez
Shaquille Nelson
Mckness Pascall
Trevon Chambers
Antonyo Artis

Time/Place
Between Heaven and Hell, a place called Hope
2004

This production runs approximately 2 hours, 10 minutes with a 10-minute intermission.
Strong language is used in this play and may not be suitable for young children.
Director, Matthew C. Williams participating in character chart exercise

Right, cast member Angella Katherine always working with positivity backed up by immense talent

Below, email from Angella to Matthew...

Mama, I’m on the newsss!

Matt, seriously tho, thank you for this learning experience and opportunity to play such an amazing character, in such a DOPE PLAYYYYY! The audience reception, and grasp/impact from the show is insane. My aunt, an already devout Christian was so moveddddddddd it’s crazy. I guess being in the show, we forget how powerful the stories is and the reason/ purpose of telling our story. Thank you for giving me the space to minister onto God’s people in a way that I never thought could be done. I’ll see you soon, also can you sign my poster today? ight, POOF , Monica OUT :)

Best,
Angella Katherine
Below, lighting designer, Jane Silverstein explaining her three worlds of light to the cast

Below, the full cast of Judas during the first full read-through of the play
Below, cast members with director doing radio interview for Brooklyn College Radio

Left, Ryan Bannon keeping in character as Judas in rehearsal

Below, another digital flyer created by Rae Mizrachi

God has the biggest love for the least of his creatures—and Judas was the leastest creature I had ever seen.

The Last Days of Judas Iscariot
Left, Mckensi Pascal's character chart for Mary Magdalene

Right, Ryan Bannon's character chart for Judas Iscariot

"It would've been better for that man if he had never been born."
Options for Witness Chair

Andrej Nawoj <andrejnawoj@gmail.com>
Thu 11/7/2019 3:07 PM
You; Kenneth Jeff Stiefel, Sofia Claudino; Production BC Theatre Dept; Michael Redman; Dailee Morrone

Show all 5 attachments (6 MB)  Download all  Save all to OneDrive

Good Afternoon,

Attached are different options for Witness chairs (including that currently in rehearsal) as discussed in the Production Meeting today.

Team Sets is wondering which chair is most appealing to the show and

Above, email from Prop Artisan, Andrej Nawoj about the ever-crucial witness chair

Below, the Judas set taking shape in the New Workshop Theater
Left, director's notes from the last dress rehearsal

Below, the completed jury platform set piece
Below, actor Mariah Sanchez as Caiaphas the Elder, one of three characters she portrayed with "Tony-worthy" precision

Below, director's notes to Mariah before opening night

Mariah: Please meet with me sometime between 5pm and 6pm if at all possible to review transitions and gavel bangs. Whenever you bang the gavel, BANG IT! I know it’s gotten a little muddy with introduction of the transitions. We’ll get it right. Push more into the pretend Jesus beat with Cunningham and Fayoume. Drill into Cunningham on this. You and Cunningham must get some diagonal space between each other on the 1864 Altuna speech. It might be too much to say Conjo. Use Fayoume’s name with "Sientate". We need to abbreviate your "Hello" to Peter as you enter. Maybe just a caring acknowledgement without having to touch. It’s taking too much time to break up your words to do this physical action. Remember that you can rotate your chair as Caiaphas to face the lawyers more directly. Bring back your objective as Caiaphas. Bring back the fight, especially with Cunningham. It got mellow and un-driven last night. Speak to the court on Caiaphas monologue. There is no-one down right. Fight harder for your people during Cunningham questioning. Don’t roll over and give up. The "people who need forgiveness" are the jury members. Use them on this.
Left, Rae Mizrachi as defense attorney, Fabiana Aziza Cunningham

Above, Shaquille Nelson as Pontius Pilat

Left, Dara Mellon as the Bailiff
PROMOTIONAL JUDAS VIDEO LINK: https://vimeo.com/391204620